

Building a Foundation
Matthew 7:24-27
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This past week, as I was preparing for our New Orleans trip, I went through some of the pictures from last year, when 22 of us worked to gut houses destroyed by the hurricanes. One of the images that was most striking to me was of a huge shed that was behind one of the houses. The shed sat on cinderblocks, and when the water rose, it lifted up the shed and dropped it on the fence at an angle. Everything inside was ruined.

I thought of that image when I read the passage for today's sermon, because it reminded me about the importance of a solid foundation. Now, right at the beginning, I want to be clear on something. Jesus says those who hear his words and don't put them into practice are like the man who built his house on a faulty foundation. When the waters came, the house was destroyed.

I am in no way implying that what happened in the Gulf Coast had anything to do with whether or not the people were putting Christ's words into practice. The hurricanes were not a punishment from God. Houses were not destroyed and lives were not ruined because people had been disobedient to God. But the Jesus' words today do have something to say to us about the importance of a strong foundation.

Jesus' words make more sense when we understand the context, and Jesus, being a carpenter, knew what he was talking about. The area of the world where he lived and did his ministry often experienced dry seasons and rainy seasons. During the dry seasons, dried-up riverbeds seemed to be a great place to build a house. That is, until the rainy season. If a person built a house in the sand of a dry riverbed, when the rains came, even if you had a sump pump and a backup sump pump, the house would be washed away.

So Jesus compares bad choices in residential architecture with the hearing and doing of his words. And the implication we can draw from his words is that if you hear them and put them into practice, you have a solid foundation. If you hear them, but don't put them into practice, you've built your faith on shallow sand, and you are vulnerable to having your faith washed away when a storm comes.

I think it's interesting that in both cases, the wise and the foolish builder both hear Jesus' words, but only one of them puts them into practice. The issue isn't whether or not you listen; it's whether or not you do what you've heard. I find that remarkable in light of what I went through in seminary. In the 90 credit hours I completed for my Master of Divinity degree, I must have read well over 200 books, wrote hundreds of pages of papers, and spent countless hours in discussion.

But what Jesus is telling me here is that his teaching is not meant for only discussion and analysis. Now, granted, you can't do what he says to do if you don't know what he says to do, so the reading and study of the Bible is important. But it can't be left in the classroom, or at the Bible study, or on the bedside table. Jesus' teachings are only effective if we put into practice what we've heard.

There are two kinds of people Jesus is addressing here. One is the person who hears the word, but doesn't do it. But the other is the person who does the actions, but doesn't really hear the words. I know a lot of people who do their best to live good lives and give to charities and lend a helping hand and think that's good enough. But good

deeds don't make sense unless they are grounded in God's word, unless we understand the reason behind why we are called to live that way. To truly understand what it means to love God and love your neighbor, you have to strive to understand and live out both parts of that command. To only do one or the other is less than who we're called to be.

That's what the 26 of us going to New Orleans are striving to do. We've heard the call to help those in need, to reach out to the least of these, to offer a cup of cold water in Jesus' name. We have sought to ground ourselves in the word of God, and will continue to do so on the trip with daily scripture reading and devotions, and then we'll go and live out that word.

Having been to New Orleans last year, I can't tell you how important that grounding is, because without some spiritual nourishment, some source of hope, it would be easy to fall into despair. I remember driving through the lower 9th Ward last year, seeing all the devastation, and thinking, "How in the world do you recover from this? Where do you go from here when all you know has been washed away?"

As I worked at the house on Majestic Oaks, carrying out wedding albums and nice clothes and exercise equipment to be hauled away to a landfill, I tried to put myself in the place of the homeowner, a lady named Iris DiCrispino, who raised seven kids in that house. She had lived in there for decades, and didn't even have time to take her most precious possessions with her as she fled from the rising waters. Where is the hope there?

A few months after we got back, I got a card from Iris. She was living in another part of Louisiana, and was waiting to find out what was going to happen to her house. But the tone of the letter was one of gratitude, not despair. She was obviously a woman of faith, and her words were grounded in the hope that comes from faith in Christ. This past April, I got an Easter card from her. Iris had a solid foundation, and was living out what she knew to be true.

Building that foundation is not easy work. In ancient times, in order to make a house secure, the builder would have to dig down through the sand until he hit the rock beneath it. Then he would anchor the foundation in the rock, ensuring that the house will stand firm. Getting to the rock was hard work, and it took time. Building on the sand was so much more convenient and a lot less trouble.

But a conveniently built house was not a sturdily built house, and the same can be said of faith. A convenient, shallow faith is easily washed away, swept up in the latest cultural fad or religious movement. I believe so many people get stirred up over things like "The DaVinci Code" and the "Left Behind" series of books because their faith is not rooted in the word of God, so then it becomes vulnerable to swaying and shifting.

But it's easy to leave our faith at surface level, because most of the time that's enough. Most of the time, coming on Sunday morning and hearing God's word and then going on with our lives is enough. We build our foundation on other things that are less sturdy and reliable. "I can take care of myself. Nothing can rattle me." When life is good, we actually believe that. When it's a dry season, we can build our house just about anywhere and not worry about the foundation we've built.

But what about when the storms come? The rains come down, the waters rise and sweep our stability out from under us. That's when the difference between listeners and disciples is most evident. That's when our foundation is tested. We do not choose whether we will face storms in life; we do choose the foundation on which we stand.

I found it interesting when we were down there last year how little it seems had been done in some areas. A member at the church where we stayed told me that the local and national government had focused almost exclusively on infrastructure issues, meaning there was nothing left to help with the tearing down and rebuilding. I said to him, “Who’s going to do that?” And he said, “You are.” He said, “The work of rebuilding is being done, house by house, by the volunteers who are coming down here. Without them, this doesn’t get done.”

So we go, representing this church as the body of Christ, to help rebuild the foundation, and to bring a message of hope. I know, even though there are 26 of us, the work we do this week will be less than a drop in the bucket of what needs to be done. But it matters. Not just for the tangible, but for the spiritual. I pray that through us, God will be able to help people find a rock-solid foundation on which to rebuild their faith. Because everyone down there knows how quickly all that you have can be washed away.

It’s a lesson we all can learn. It’s worth the time and effort to dig down deep, to ground ourselves in God’s word, to live out what we hear. You can’t do it if you don’t know what it says to do. Ground yourself in God’s word. I’d recommend starting with the gospel of Matthew or the gospel of Luke. Just sit down and read it. It will take you less than an hour, I bet. But you’ll have started the process of laying a foundation that cannot be moved. You will be standing on the solid rock that is Jesus Christ.